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Rebuilding and re-embodying: music after 9/11

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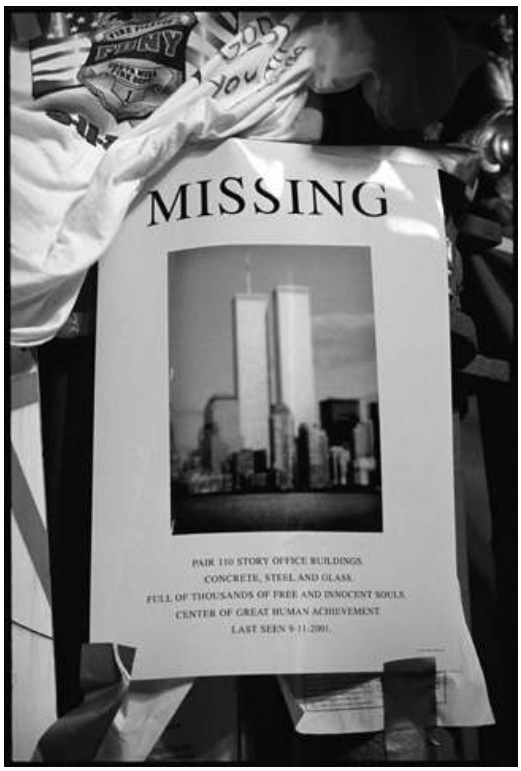

Sandra Boer, [Untitled], 2001, from "Here Is New York: A Democracy of Photographs" in "Remembering 9/11" at the International Center of Photography

1 Even before it was standing, the World Trade Center had acquired a lifelike quality, and this quality could not be separated from music. In the *Sonic Memorial Project*[1]–initiated by independent producers The Kitchen Sisters–, a sound collage of interviews and phone calls made to NPR after 9/11, we can hear Les Robertson, the lead structural engineer on the construction of the Twin Towers. He talks about the way he and his

team determined how much the buildings could "sway" under the pressure of the wind without it disturbing the people working in offices on the upper floors. He says: "Often, buildings speak to you," summoning to the mind of the listener the image of two giantesses dancing to the music of the wind, echoing the many newly-weds who got to sway inside them.

2 Similarly, the French high-wire artist Philippe Petit speaks in the *Sonic Memorial* of what he felt on August 7th 1974, when he walked between the Towers:

> I could feel the wind, I also could feel the vibration of the breathing of the Twin Towers. Because of the difference of temperature they breathe, they move, they don't really sway to the human eye but I can assure you I remember vividly some kind of vibration at times on my wire as I was dancing.[2] (34:12)

3 In a 2018 interview[3], Petit added: "I am a wire walker and I fell in love with two towers."

4 With this view, I would argue that the mourning of the 9/11 victims and the mourning of the Twin Towers are tightly linked together. In the musical pieces I will be analyzing, there is a need to remember and a desire to bring back the lost people and the lost Towers and therefore, to rebuild and re-embody at the same time. I will first examine how the *Sonic Memorial* emphasizes the intrinsic link between the World Trade Center, human life and sound. I will then focus on three different forms of musical expression that have been used as a way to show grief in works by composer William Basinski, jazz saxophonist and composer Ornette Coleman and American heavy metal band Soulfly. Lastly, I will focus on the place of voice in post-9/11 productions.

5 First, just as Robertson and Petit do in the interviews, the callers of NPR also mention the lifelike aspect of the Towers. For example, Lori Pike[4] describes the "heartbeat" of the revolving doors, whose "thump-thump" she imitates, personifying and embodying the buildings. The buildings were also filled with life by those who came in and out of them, entering in some sort of symbiosis with them. Another caller speaks of the "roar" created by the sounds of restaurants–for example their plates and cutlery–reverberating against the World Trade Center.

6 The contributions of the callers to the *Sonic Memorial* gather into testimonies and thoughts to fulfill the purpose of keeping the memory of the 9/11 victims and of the World Trade Center alive. As Jay Allison, curator of the *Sonic Memorial Project*, puts it, the "material needs to be gathered and preserved now," before it slips through our fingers and escapes our memory. The calls are messages sent into the void, made by a voice alone on a telephone, but reaching out for others and thus creating a web, a chorus of voices. Lori Pike has no recording of the revolving doors to offer the producers, but she is "hoping [they will] find [it] from someone" who does. Another caller, Agnes, says at the beginning of her call before sharing a sound: "I'll give you a little bit of it." There is an apparent desire to create something that is almost tangible, to gather bits and pieces as if to erect a building, or reconstruct a body. If the finished memorial does not replace the missing people and towers, it can at least stand in their place as a ghostly presence and a reminder of their musical dimension.

7 Secondly, one can find different ways of expressing in music the losses of 9/11. In the summer of 2001, composer William Basinski began transferring muzak loops he had recorded in the 80s from cassette tapes to CD. When the 9/11 attacks occurred, he went on the rooftop of his building in Brooklyn and filmed New York's skyline being filled with the cloud of smoke. He then superimposed the sound of the loops in

decomposition onto the images and called the work the *Disintegration Loops*[5]. It is described by Sacha Frere-Jones in a New Yorker article[6] as a "mesh of horns and strings" that create an "uneasy limbo". On the images, one can see the smoke produced by the ruins of the World Trade Center going upwards in a way that is imitated by the music which, I would argue, evokes a sense of elevation. There is a solemn and melancholic atmosphere emerging from the slowing down of the loops as the tapes are breaking down. It sounds like an orchestra playing in the distance. The music in itself does not, in my view, evoke grief, but its decay does and it transforms it into a funeral march. The repetition of the loop calls to mind the image of a procession, the slow rhythm of a crowd advancing. Gradually the sound becomes blurred, as if the band was marching away, until the music becomes almost inaudible. The loops also symbolize history repeating itself, and the destruction of the tapes the decay of the Towers. By superimposing the music on the image, Basinski leads us to think that the former was directly inspired by the latter. It is as if it had been composed on the spot and played as long as the smoke continued to rise from the site, serving as a contemplation of the events.

8 Jazz saxophonist Ornette Coleman composed a piece entitled "9/11"[7] which he only performed live and never recorded. Not taking into account the possibility for the piece to be recorded during a live performance, this means that it can only be listened to as a group, as an audience, and that one's taking in of the piece will always be tied to others'. It is also an illustration of the vanishing of the Towers in the sense that it is ephemeral and in this way is not an attempt at rebuilding, but at holding on to memories. In Coleman's "9/11", the double bass is at first played with a bow, providing a deep omnipresent vibration in the background reminiscent of the sound of a plane. It is then played by hand, with higher-pitched notes and an increased tempo, then descends into lower notes. Similarly, Coleman's melody on the saxophone gives the impression of ascending and descending by ending phrases with longer notes or accelerating while going from high-pitched notes to lower-pitched notes, and producing isolated notes. The withering sounds of the saxophone are highlighted by the steadier, lower tones of the bass guitar. Around 3 minutes in, the tension of the piece culminates in a dissonance between the instruments that may reflect chaos, and indeed mirror either the Towers being hit or collapsing. Once again, the bow is picked up to play the bass, with the saxophone's inflexions mirroring the strings' vibration. Then, gradually, the notes become longer and the vibrations slow down. The saxophone goes silent before being reintroduced by a short drums solo and taking up its flight again. The saxophone is substituted by a trumpet for a few seconds shortly before the piece ends. Although there is a climax in the middle, the variations of rhythm throughout the piece make it difficult for the listener to associate figuralism with it. It seems to suggest rather the idea of a cycle, as the saxophone's notes always rise up again.

9 On the opposite end of the spectrum, American heavy metal band Soulfly "recorded" a silent track entitled 9-11-01[8] on their album *3*. It is one minute long, obviously a minute of silence for the victims of 9/11, but also comes as a counterpoint to all the noise produced as a reaction to the event. It shows the place of silence in music and, in a way, reflects the absence of what has been lost.

10 Thirdly, voice has been used to express grief in 9/11-related musical production. For language helps process trauma and one could argue that this is why voice became a

privileged mode of expression in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Steve Reich's three-movement composition *WTC 9/11* (2011) is an example of the use of voice in musical productions in relation to the fall of the Twin Towers, combining various recordings of people speaking with music played by a string quartet. The movements are titled "9/11", "2010" and "WTC" respectively. The first title emphasizes the date because it features recordings from the North American Aerospace Defense Command and the New York City Fire Department, thus focusing on the action that took place on that specific day. "2010" stands for the date of the interviews that are part of this movement of Reich's friends and neighbors who lived in Manhattan in 2001 and experienced the events. "WTC" acts as the spatial counterpart to "9/11" and puts the emphasis, this time, on the geographical location–i.e. Ground Zero. Indeed, Reich explains in an interview with ABC Arts[9] that, according to the Jewish tradition, "from the time of death until the time of burial, you don't leave the body unattended". For this reason, members of an Upper West Side synagogue endeavoured to sing and recite psalms next to the bodies. On the Sabbath, however, as they could not carry money or use public transport, they searched for people who lived closer to the site and who could get there easily. They found students from Stern College, Yeshiva University, who volunteered to perform the task. Hence the emphasis on the place in the title of the last movement.

11 "9/11"[10] begins with a violin imitating the beeping sound of a phone off the hook. Recorded voices from NORAD and FDNY come in with an echo. They are faint and some of the words are difficult to make out. The crackling sounds of the recordings are reminiscent of the destruction of Basinski's loops. Some of the words are slowed down–for example: "They came from Boston"–giving the impression that, rather than being an immediate reaction, they are the voice of someone telling a story and looking back on the past. The voices are accompanied by low notes played by strings, and merge in them, sink into the melody of the instruments actually showing how "real-life" sounds–i.e. the voices pronouncing words that were at the time far from being performed for a musical piece–merge into Reich's composition. As a matter of fact, this is also illustrated by the fact that the sound level of the instruments is often as high as that of the voices if not higher, once again uniting the voices with the music. This common intensity also underlines the confusion brought about by the events, which in turn is also exemplified in the simulated stammering of the people speaking, with the end of their sentences being cut off or repeated. This repetition of words and sentences is evocative of the saturation of information and of the media coverage. It also imitates the mind revisiting the memories over and over again trying to make sense of them, as if going back to the start of the sentence might help clarify it.

12 In the second movement[11], the voice of a girl who was at school at the time of the crash comes in with a resonating tone which gives it a dream-like, robotic quality. Different friends and neighbors of Reich's recall the events of 9/11, creating a narrative which progresses as the tempo speeds up. At times the music and the voices are at odds, for example when someone says "it was chaos", the composition remains disciplined as the tempo does not change. At other times, it reflects the meaning of the words. When another man says "the ground started shaking" to which a woman replies "you could feel it", the bows on the strings provide an oscillating rhythm that indeed conveys the idea of shaking, of trembling. The movement ends with a man saying: "what's gonna happen next?", before silence settles in.

13 The last part[12] is quieter, and in fact Reich has stated that he wanted it that way so that the listener would have to lean in to try and understand what the people were singing. The piece ends with composer and Reich's friend David Lang saying "And there's the world–and there's the world–right here," before the beeping of the phone starts again. The composition thus comes back to the place where it first began and turns into a cycle suggesting that History repeats itself.

14 Voice also serves to express a pain that cannot be expressed through language. The sound that Agnes shares on her voicemail to NPR is a wail. Her voice cannot be shaped into words. Instead it echoes the sound of sirens; it is a ringing complaint that illustrates the memory of 9/11 in Agnes's mind and which she wants to share and find in others.

15 One can find at the site of the Flight 93 Memorial in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, yet another example of the use of voice as a means of mourning and paying homage. The Tower of Voices is a ninety-three feet tall metal and concrete construction onto which are suspended forty aluminum wind chimes, one for every passenger and crew member who died in the crash on 9/11. Each chime has a different tone and is tuned to produce a sound in harmony with the others. According to the National Park Service website, "(the) tower is surrounded by concentric rings of white pines and deciduous plantings" that "may be interpreted as resonating 'sound waves' from the Tower, alluding to the auditory qualities of the chimes housed within". The National Park Service website provides a five-minute simulated audio[13] of what the chimes sound like together. There are constant, low vibrations that act as a background and that eventually start resembling the sound of a cello, against which other sharper and lighter notes resound. The intensity of the deeper notes varies, wave-like, and the shorter notes that play off them come as if to remind us of the existence of each passenger. There is no proper melodic line to speak of, yet there is harmony in the chorus of chimes. Once again, music unites a building with human lives. A new tower springs from the ground and the dead are given new voices. Ironically, a CBS segment dedicated to the Tower leaves very little place for the sound of the chimes, which keep getting interrupted by the presenters' voices.

16 To conclude, sound and music are a way of bringing the lost ones back, but also to acknowledge that they are gone: a musical piece has a beginning and an end. For the length of a song or of a piece of music, one can have access to a universe where the Towers have not yet fallen, or to immerse themselves in an atmosphere that allows them to grieve. Once the piece is over, one lets go of the Towers and of the 9/11 victims again. I have found that, on the one hand, in addition to grief, in several of the pieces I have chosen to focus on–namely Reich's *WTC 9/11* and Coleman's "9/11"–there is a sense of urgency, of rising tension. This takes the form of strident sounds and a quickening rhythm that might suggest the idea of an underlying threat. Whether this refers to the planes approaching the towers, or to the tragedies that repeat throughout history is left to interpretation. On the other hand, Basinski's *Disintegration Loops*, Soulfly's "9-11-01" and the Tower of Voices provide a more contemplative view of 9/11 and, instead of leading the listener towards an emotion, the music in those instances lets them find their own way to their emotions through its melody (or lack thereof).

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NOTES

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